



Helping the Anxious Child or Teen Find Rest

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

As a parent it is challenging when you feel helpless to effect change for a child who is suffering or anxious. Parents often ask their kids “Just tell me what’s wrong,” or “what can I do to help you,” only to stare into blank faces or be given reasons that defy understanding. As a child’s anxiety grows, so does a parent’s. The more a child is full of worry, the more a parent can question their ability to help them feel safe.

Parents sometimes look to professionals to alleviate their child’s anxiety or to calm them down; however, one of the most important sources of rest for a child is usually overlooked – a strong caring attachment with an adult who is responsible for them. The challenge with anxiety is it can displace a parent from seeing they can still the answer to their child’s needs.

Anxiety is considered one of the biggest health issues in children and teens worldwide. Despite its prevalence, the root cause of anxiety is rarely discussed beyond genetics, neurotransmitters, behavioral symptoms, disorder, or dysfunctional cognitive patterns. Part of challenge is it is difficult to put one’s finger on the source of anxiety as it feels nebulous, ephemeral, and vague. What is anxiety and where does it come from? Why does it strike out of the blue, can last for short or long time periods, is more prevalent in some kids and not in others? In order to make sense of these questions we need to consider what anxiety is in the first place.

What is Anxiety?

The word anxiety is associated with the symptoms that go with it including restlessness, agitation, stomach aches, clinging and clutching behaviour, apprehensive feelings, problems focusing, racing thoughts, or hyperactivity. A young child once told me, “it feels like my tummy is making butter right now.” That churning feeling is due to an activated alarm system in the body. The human brain is a sophisticated alarm system that is highly tuned to perceiving threat in one’s environment. It filters through stimuli and detects potential danger, providing an expedient warning system through a heightened sense of alarm when a threat is near. Sometimes there are false alarms and sometimes the danger is imminent or ongoing leaving the autonomic nervous system heightened.

It begs the question what type of threat does the brain remain vigilant for? We commonly think about danger to physical well-being but routinely miss distress when it comes to matters of emotional well being. Developmental science has firmly established how human beings are creatures of attachment – it is one of our greatest hungers and needs. The experience of being separated from who and what we are attached to is the most provocative and impactful of all human experiences (1). According to Gordon Neufeld, it is separation alarm that is most often at the root of anxiety and has the capacity to stir a child up and hijack their attention systems.

One can only understand separation alarm to the degree they understand attachment. There are many ways we attach to people and things – through the

senses (touch, taste, smell, see, hear), being the same as someone, feeling a sense of belonging or loyalty, wanting to be significant, being in love, or sharing one's secrets. Separation is what comes when there is a threat to being with, like, belonging, significant, loved, or known by another. The separation can be real or imaginary, and is impacted by development. It is difficult to talk a three year old out of being afraid of the monsters that live under their bed or the teen who feels everyone is looking at them all the time. At these ages children can experience separation alarm in becoming their own person and maturing.

There are many sources of separation and it is based upon a child's perception. Some are sad when their teeth fall out or they get upset at bedtime – the biggest separation of the day as they lose consciousness. Typical experiences of separation can include the birth of a sibling, a move, going away to camp or school, parents going to work, transitioning between two homes, or realizing bad things can happen to the people one is attached to. There are many hidden sources of separation including feeling responsible for your parent's feelings or actions. When a child feels they are too much to handle or they don't measure up to expectations, they may feel distant from their adults. If a child becomes peer oriented they will experience a sense of separation from their parents. When a child doesn't feel their parent's can keep them safe or prevent bad things from happening to them, their feelings of alarm can emerge in a strong way.

Parents need to make sense of a child's alarm by considering where a child is at developmentally, what separation they are experiencing, and through their relationship with them. Efforts to talk a child into wellness will be short lived at best as alarm stems from activation in the emotional regions of the brain. It is not logic that holds the keys for unraveling an alarm problem but in understanding how the emotional system works.

Why is Fear Important?

Fear is the oldest human emotion and is meant to ebb and flow as things in our environment activate it. It is meant to move humans to caution when necessary and gives rise to conscientious, concerned, and careful behavior. Parents routinely use discipline techniques aimed at alarming a child such as yelling, threats, or punishment; which rely on scaring them into compliance. The overuse of fear based discipline techniques can contribute to or be a source of anxiety in a child. The alarm system works best when not overly provoked or used.

Sometimes there are things that scare a child or teen that cannot be changed – a pet dies, friends move away, or parents get divorced. Sometimes it is tears that are the answer to alarm and bring with it resiliency to handle the adversities that are part of life. Alternatively, sometimes what is required in the face of alarm is courage. It is the mixing of feelings of fear and desire that give rise to courage and push one towards action. While a child may be afraid to write a test, it is their desire for a good mark that gives them courage to try. While a teen may be afraid to be part of the school play, it is their desire to have this experience that propels them forward. Fear is not a problem to get rid of; rather, it is a way of moving us forward to caution, to tears, or to courage. It is a lack of fear that poses a bigger problem in children or teens as this emotion can no longer do the work it is supposed to by keeping them safe.

Why Does Fear Take Over and Create Anxiety?

While fear is a key emotion that needs to be felt in a vulnerable way, sometimes it can't be. Sometimes the thing that alarms a child is too big to name, too overwhelming to think about or to discuss, and their brain starts to numb out these

feelings so as to provide a defense against them. In other words, when life is too scary, the brain is designed to release chemicals to numb out the sensation of fear. When a child is anxious it doesn't mean the emotional system isn't working properly but that it may be working exactly as it should be. For example, in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the children refuse to refer to the evil 'Voldemort' by name. They refer to him as "the one that cannot be named" as his real name creates too much vulnerability as it brings him to consciousness along with thoughts of death and destruction. As the children refer to him in a vague way, they are shielded from the worst of the emotional distress and continue with everyday functioning despite their heightened alarm level.

Anxiety is created when a child's emotional system defends against seeing the things that would make them feel too afraid. If they don't see it or feel it – they are safer. In short, anxiety could best be seen as being alarmed without eyes because seeing would make it hurt too much. The defenses provide a veil to shield against the alarm child but as a result, a child can no longer find their courage or cry in response to the threat because it has disappeared from plain view. This is why our children tell us they feel afraid but don't know why.

What Are Some Strategies to Reduce Anxiety?

The strategies to reduce anxiety have little to do with reason, talking a child out of their fears, or telling them to calm down. They are focused at the root of the issue — separation alarm — and put a parent back in the driver's seat in bringing a child to rest.

1. Reduce Separation

Anxiety can be heightened when a child has to separate from a parent – going to school, daycare, or to sleep. A parent can reduce physical separation with a child by keeping them closer at these times. They can check in on a child at lunchtime or drop off a lunch, reduce the amount of time spent in daycare, or send notes with them as they head off for their day. At night, a sense of contact and closeness can be provided by staying with the child until they fall asleep, checking in on them repeatedly, or sleeping near them. A further way to reduce physical separation is to temporarily stop all non-essential attachment activities such as playdates or structured activities, although sports and movement are a great way to reduce alarm.

Adults can also reduce emotional separation by refraining from all discipline techniques that isolate or exclude a child from the people or things they are attached to. A parent will need to lead through disciplinary issues by ensuring the relationship stays intact while they also take responsibility for the problems that arise. Furthermore, if a child has people in their life that present separation by either rejection or not being liked, a parent is wise to reduce contact where necessary and shield from further wounding interactions. When a child is anxious, a parent needs to communicate at every turn when the next point of connection will be, who will take care of the child, and lead the child with confidence. If separation is the problem, then relationships with caring adults will be the cure.

2. Provide for a Sense of Rest and Safety

Adults can provide a sense of safety and rest to a child who is full of anxiety by strengthening their relationship. The expression of delight, enjoyment, and warmth by an adult will help a child feel nourished. An adult can present oneself as the answer for comfort, helping when they feel lost, and inspiring trust and dependence on them. They can take charge of situations concerning the child such as deciding

where they go and what they do as well as take the lead in solving problems for them as appropriate. A child needs to see their parent knows how to take care of them so one should refrain from asking too many questions that could convey otherwise. When a parent repeatedly asks a child what is wrong or what they can do to help, it will do little to inspire confidence in their care taking.

3. Accept the Alarm

When a child is anxious they may exhibit a number of symptoms that can be alarming and confusing. Adults need to convey they are not alarmed by the appearance of these symptoms and to avoid battling their appearance. Rather than trying to talk a child out of their fears or claiming they are irrational, a parent can take a strong lead and convey they know how to take care of the child and the circumstances around them. If a child can't sleep a parent can tell them it isn't their job to worry about it. If a child is worried about what will happen the following day, the parent can tell them they will lead them through it. A parent can normalize a child's distress with comforting words such as, "what child isn't afraid of monsters at night?"

If a parent makes room for the anxiety and anticipates it, then the alarm will be better managed and diminished. For example, if a child is afraid to go out of the house, the parent can convey they want to hold their hand and stay close to them. When a parent is not alarmed in the face of their child's anxiety, it will serve to reduce or at least manage the alarm symptoms better. Too many anxious children are made to feel responsible for their symptoms instead of being reassured by adults that it is natural to feel uneasy or scared.

4. Find Acceptable Substitutes for the Alarm

Parents need to try and reduce things in a child's life that create too much separation alarm as well as introduce substitutes to help deal with it. Exercise helps to release the alarm chemicals stirred up in the body as well as activate the parasympathetic nervous system associated with rest. Rocking, watching flames flicker or fish swim in tanks can also be soothing because of the repetitive motion involved. Human touch and massaging a child can also activate chemical pain relievers in the body through oxytocin and opiate receptors. Chewing gum can also relieve anxiety or walking outside and spending time with pets. One of the best ways to release a child's emotions is through play so they should be afforded lots of opportunity to do so on their own or with parents.

5. Help them Find their Tears

Tears provide a wonderful release to alarm and parents shouldn't be afraid to let their child cry when needed. Small things may turn into big upsets and but it is likely the alarm feelings have found a doorway through which they can be released. It is less vulnerable and easier to cry about the small disappointments in life than having to name the big things that hurt too much.

Sometimes children are too overwhelmed by their alarm and frustration is likely to be expressed instead of tears. If a parent can provide some room for frustration to be released safely, they are likely to get to the more tender ones underneath. It takes patience and time to melt a child's frustration into tears but when you do, a child will find some rest from the alarm, temporarily or more permanently.

Sometimes a parent will need to help a child find their words for the things that frustrate them in order to help them get to their tears.

6. Cultivate Courage

When a child is capable of mixed feelings and thoughts, typically at the age of 5 to 7 or later for more sensitive children, they will be able to use courage to deal with their alarm. A parent can help by leading the child to consider the desires they have to face situations that are alarming such as reading in front of their class or going to school each day. When a parent helps a child find their anticipation and apprehension at the same time, they will have fostered courage as a powerful antidote to their fears. A child needs to be given room to be apprehensive and not told to think positively or talked out of being afraid.

An anxious child is an alarmed one. They should never be made to feel responsible for keeping themselves safe nor to battle alarm on their own. Parents are the best pain relievers around and it starts with giving them a generous invitation for contact and closeness.

References

(1) The information in this article is from Dr. Gordon Neufeld's, Making Sense of Anxiety Course, offered online through the Neufeld Institute, Vancouver, BC, www.neufeldinstitute.org. For more information, you can also view Gordon Neufeld's talk on anxiety at Dalai Lama Centre for Peace and Education, Making Sense of Anxiety Talk

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